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SUBJECT: VENEZUELAN ELECTION UPDATE - NOON (EST)

11. (SBU) Summary. Opposition candidate Manuel Rosales told the media that he is concerned that voting delays are occurring disproportionately in traditional opposition strongholds. Rosales nevertheless said that voting was occurring with "a certain degree of normality." A relaxed President Chavez told the media that the election is proceeding normally. In response to a question about North Korea, Chavez suggested Venezuela wants good relations with all countries, including the United States.

12. (SBU) CNE President Tibisay Lucena conceded to state TV that many polling stations did not open at 6:00 a.m. as scheduled, but stressed that 99.9 percent of polling stations were functioning by mid-morning. Embassy's informal election observers are gaining access to some polls and are being politely turned away from others. They report long lines at most polling stations, as well as some noticeable irregularities. OAS Secretary General Jose Miguel Insulza issued a December 2 appeal to Venezuelan voters to vote in "peace and tranquillity" and urged the media to respect the prohibition on broadcasting unofficial election returns. End Summary.

Manuel Rosales' Initial Concerns

13. (U) After voting in Maracaibo at 10:15 a.m. local time, opposition candidate Manuel Rosales told the media that his campaign has concluded that electoral problems are occurring more frequently in areas where the opposition has traditionally done well. Rosales said that his campaign did a quick study that showed that 36 percent of electoral problems occurred in opposition strongholds, 20 percent in areas where both Chavez and the opposition enjoy support, and five percent in Chavez strongholds. Rosales also alleged that his supporters in at least four states received printed receipts showing "null" votes after trying to vote for Rosales, and he urged the CNE to rectify these problems. Rosales praised the military's efforts to provide security and logistics for the elections and characterized voting so far relatively normal. Rosales is slated to return to Caracas the afternoon of December 3.

Chavez' Comments

14. (U) After voting in Caracas at 11:45 a.m. local time, a relaxed President Chavez told the media that he believes the electoral process is proceeding normally. He urged the opposition not to "shoot bullets without proof" and urged them to accept the eventual electoral results. In response to a question from a Japanese reporter about North Korea, Chavez said Venezuela seeks cooperation with all countries, and then added that he wants good relations with the United States. He said he considered remarks by the "Assistant Secretary" (Shannon) that Venezuela is a democracy is a "good

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sign." He also called the recent electoral results in Nicaragua and Ecuador "good signs."

CNE Line

15. (U) CNE President Tibisay Lucena told state TV that while many voting centers did not open at 6:00 am. as scheduled, over 95 percent had opened by 9:00 a.m. and 99.9 percent were functioning by mid-morning. Lucena suggested that "null" votes are the result of voters who press the party name or candidate's face, instead of the oval next to their preferred candidate on the electronic ballot. Other members of the CNE held a late morning press conference to reinforce the same point.

Embassy Election Observation

16. (SBU) Pairs of embassy informal observers are visiting polling stations in Caracas and seven states. Ambassador and Deskoff also drove to some Caracas polling stations in both affluent and working class neighborhoods. Embassy observers have gained access to inside polling stations in about 50 percent of the visits and have been turned away politely the other 50 percent of the time. They report long lines at most polling stations, including at polling stations in Chavez and Rosales strongholds. Several embassy teams also confirm opposition complaints of voters receiving "blank" printed voting receipts.

17. (SBU) Some embassy election observers report that the electronic voting machines are hooked up. a violation of CNE norms. According to CNE rules, the machines are supposed to produce a local voting tally ("acta") and then local officials may hook them up to transmit these results to the CNE tabulation center. Active duty military officers appear to have the lead in providing security at polling stations, although reservists, in some cases armed, are also playing a prominent role at some polling stations. At least one embassy election team has noticed that fingerprinting machines are causing more delays in opposition areas than in pro-Chavez areas.

OAS SecGen Insulza's Press Release

18. (U) OAS SecGen Insulza released a December 2 statement urging all of Venezuela's political actors to "strictly respect the electoral norms" of the presidential election. He urged that the elections take place in "peace and tranquillity" and Venezuelans to put aside their profound differences. Insulza also urged that the media respect electoral rules prohibiting the transmission of unofficial electoral results to avoid "errors or provoking undesirable reactions."

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